



Australian Academy of Science

Ian Potter House, Gordon Street, Canberra ACT 2601

Response to questions on notice following hearing of 8 October 2018

At the hearing of the Senate References Committee on Environment and Communications Inquiry into Australia's Faunal Extinction Crisis on 8 October 2018, the Australian Academy of Science (the Academy) took on notice a request by the Committee Chair Senator Janet Rice for the Academy's consideration of the policy proposals presented by the Places You Love Alliance (PYLA).

The Academy is not a member of PYLA and does not have a formal position on its policy recommendations. This response is based on a consideration of the recommendations on their merits.

PYLA Policy recommendation 1: Create truly national environment laws that genuinely protect Australia's natural and cultural heritage. The Federal Government must retain responsibility for current matters of national environmental significance and protect them effectively. National oversight must be expanded to land clearing, biodiversity and ecosystems, water resources, climate change, air pollution and protected areas.

The Academy's position, as articulated in our submission to the Inquiry and our evidence presented to the Committee, is that the present legislative apparatus, chiefly the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, is sufficient for ameliorating local impacts including land clearing, but that it has been ineffective against broad-scale threatening processes such as climate change or introduced species. However, this does not necessarily point to a deficiency in the legislation. The Academy considers that the requirement for national approaches to Key Threatening Processes and for fully resourced Threat Abatement Plans can be met under the present legislation.

The Academy endorses the principle that, as a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity and related international agreements, responsibility for national-scale environmental threats – land clearing, biodiversity, ecosystem management, water resource management, maintenance of protected areas, and most especially climate change – should rest with the Federal Government. That said, we recognise that states have primary responsibility for on-ground actions, so that coherent and transparent collaborative arrangements are required.

PYLA Policy recommendation 2: Establish an independent National Sustainability Commission to set national environmental standards and undertake strategic regional planning and report on national environmental performance. The commission would also develop enforceable national, regional, threat abatement and species level conservation plans.

The Academy supports the principle of rigorous, national, scientifically-based environmental standards. The Academy also supports the principle of national and regional threat abatement and species level conservation plans, provided those plans are based on the best available scientific evidence and are adequately resourced.



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The Academy does not have a position on the most appropriate governance model for these goals. There is no *prima facie* reason that these functions should not be carried out by the government department responsible for actions under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*; currently the Department of the Environment and Energy.

PYLA Policy recommendation 3: Establish an independent National Environmental Protection Authority that operates at arm's-length from Government to conduct transparent environmental assessments and inquiries as well as undertake monitoring, compliance and enforcement actions.

The Academy holds that as a matter of principle, environmental assessments and monitoring activities should be transparent, independent and scientifically rigorous. Scientific advice to government should be published as a matter of course, and should not be subject to political interference.

The Academy does not have a view on the most appropriate governance mechanism to achieve these goals, or to coordinate compliance and enforcement actions. However, the Academy does note that there should be provision to enforce actions taken under a Threat Abatement Plan.

Should an independent National Environmental Protection Authority be created, the Academy would recommend it should have an independent scientific advisory panel to review its methods and operations.

PYLA Policy recommendation 4: Guarantee community rights and participation in environmental decision making, including open standing provisions, open access to information about decision making and environmental trends, review of decisions based on their merits, third-party enforcement provisions and protections for costs in the public interest.

The Academy considers open access to information – especially scientific information, such as data, analysis, research reports and other research outputs – to be extremely important. Such access facilitates transparency and confidence in the scientific enterprise. Making government environmental data freely available will benefit the scientific community.

Effective communication between decision makers and the community is one of the common characteristics of successful environmental recovery actions identified in *The Book of Hope* (Garnett et al., CSIRO). The Academy supports community engagement, especially if that community is empowered with clear and accurate information about their environment.

Overall, while the Academy does not have a position on the Alliance's recommendations *per se*, it considers them broadly consistent with our submission and our evidence to the Threatened Species Inquiry. Implementing the recommended reforms would be likely to improve the scientific capabilities of the government in identifying and addressing environmental threats, and public confidence in these, which is an outcome the Academy supports.